

CES 2006 ROUNDUP

The
\$ **SENSIBLE**
Sound

29th
YEAR

HELPING AUDIOPHILES & MUSIC LOVERS TO SPEND LESS & GET MORE

www.sensible-sound.com

Number 108 • APR/MAY 06 • \$7.00/Canada \$10.00

Usher Audio R-1.5 Stereo Amplifier

"...a do-it-all stereo power amp...
one very highly recommended contender!"



Other reviews:

• Cary Audio • ELP • Grado • Marchand • Snell • Ultimate Ears

Usher Audio 1.5 Solid State Stereo Amplifier

Manufacturer – Usher Audi

67 KAI-FONG ST. SECTION 1, TAIPEI 10041 TAIWAN

Tel: 886 2 2381 6299 Fax: 886 2 2371 1053

Distributor - Thee High End 6923 Inwood Rd., Dallas, Texas 75209

214-704-6082 FAX: 214-722-0325

www.usherusa.net

Price - \$2500.00

Source – Manufacturer Loan

Reviewer – Gary Lea

After last year's eye popping experience with the Usher CP6311 speakers I would be lying if I did not say that I was really looking forward to getting my hands on the Usher 1.5 Stereo Amp. As a die hard tube guy I thought it would be very interesting to stack up the Usher against some moderate power tube amps and my new reference Jolida Music Envoy amp/preamp combo. Here was a chance to listen head to head between some comparably powered components from two different worlds. It would be Alien vs. Predator, David vs. Goliath, Lance Armstrong vs....uh, ok so maybe that is not such a good comparison as he seems to have no competition.

The Usher 1.5 caught my eye last year at CES and then again this year. When I returned home I contacted Stan Tracht, the owner of THEE HIGH END the American Distributor, about the possibility of reviewing the amp and was told it would be available. The amp would also be arriving with a set of the company's bi-wire speaker cable and interconnects. (More about these in a later issue) When the amp arrived I could hardly contain myself. I keep forgetting that I am a 50 year old man with a bad back and immediately snatched it up as though I was competing for the Gold Medal in the Clean and Jerk at the Olympics. Was that a wise move? Not so much! However the pain did not dampen my enthusiasm for the experience yet to come. I had sworn last year that I was going to go out of my way to look deeper into current solid state offerings. So finally here is a chance to just that, sore back and all.

The Usher 1.5 is a very stout stereo amp that comes with a very snappy looking brushed aluminum, two tiered face plate, with matching handles. The second tier of the face plate is attached with gold toned allen head screws. There is also a gold tone Usher emblem on the front directly above the sizable on / off rocker switch. The general look is industrious to be sure but with just enough elegance to take that edge off. Overall it reeks of quality! Heat sink fins line both sides all the way to the back of the amp. The back also sports a set of handles to make it ever so much easier to maneuver the beast. Good thing as you will need them. This puppy is no lightweight. The connections on the back are top quality. The amp is supplied with both unbalanced and balanced inputs and a switch to alternate between them. There is also a switch to bridge the channels to turn this into a scorching monoblock amp. The speaker connectors are some of the stoutest I have seen and they were easy to deal with. Once you clamped down on a spade connector they were tenacious. Think alligator jaw strength. Don't try to remove speaker cable without unscrewing the connectors.

The Usher 1.5 uses "Super Cascade" output stage topology employing metal-cased Motorola power transistors. All transistors are matched at real-world operating voltages. The 1.5 employs ultra low odd-order distortions to minimize listening fatigue. Usher also uses low impedance, high capacity EI-type power transformer and military grade metal film resistors throughout. The 1.5 quickly reaches and stays in fully warmed-up condition once turned on. This means that almost as soon as the unit is turned on it is ready to perform at full throttle

with almost no wait time to get it at optimum operating temperatures. This was a real plus compared to my usual tube warm up ritual. Rated at 150 watts per channel driving an 8 ohm load the frequency response is 20Hz to 20KHz. Overall harmonic loss is lower than .015% and the stated frequency response of 20Hz to 20 KHz is plus or minus 0.1 db. As I said this is not lightweight as the amp measures 19.7 x 19.7 x 9.25 inches and weighs in at a very hefty 88 pounds. Still it is moderate enough in dimensions to fit into a standard rack and the really interesting thing is that because the amp outputs only a modest degree of heat, you don't have to be quite as concerned about roasting other components and having yards of ventilation space around the 1.5. Keep the space around the amp reasonable and it will work well within a standard rack.

Mounted on a floor rack in my audio room the unit actually looked very attractive yet maintained certain masculinity about it. Paula thought this was one handsome piece. My friend Kris, who is an audio dealer, was also very enamored with the amp's styling and substance, not to mention the sound. It is not an amp you want to move around a great deal. Find a good location, set it up and walk away. I simply set it right in front of my rack and found that it was a pleasing visual addition to the room.

Once I was satisfied that I had it situated in the right spot and that all the connections were properly attached I fired it up and gave it about 35-40 hours of run in even though I sensed it had been fairly well broken in.

When I began to sit down and listen to the amp I was immediately struck by what I would call a genuine warmth to the sound. Was it along the lines of a 300B driven SET tube amp. Certainly not! However, it was not strident in the sense that it had any edge or harshness, or dryness that I have generally gotten from solid state amps. As an example it is what I would call the Anti Krell. Granted many companies are now making solid state amps with less and less of that dryness but this amp was something else altogether. Tube like is too simplistic and vague and can infer an artificial softness and over the top warmth. The Usher is fast, detailed and forceful in the bottom registers, it is sparkling and crisp, although not harsh, on the high end. Where it moves into a territory that is hard to get your arms around is the mid range. This is where the Usher 1.5 fools you completely into thinking it is a tube amp or at the very least a hybrid. Mind you I had been listening to my new Jolida reference system intensely directly prior to firing up the Usher. (Look for a review on the Jolida system shortly and as a side note the Jolida is a 200 watt per channel tube mono block system that costs three times what the Usher costs.) The tube sound seemed to come on strongly in the area of vocals.

I had the joy and the difficulty of auditioning and reviewing several different components that all seemed to arrive at the same time this year. I spent several months listening to the 1.5 in a variety of configurations. The Usher 1.5 stereo power amplifier is a real star and a ballsy player with a warm, supple sense of detail strong reserves of power that can drive any set of loudspeakers to concert levels and still maintain a sense of ease and intimacy. I mated this amp with Usher's own CP6311, the AES Q5er, Soliloquy 6.0i, PMC GB1, and the AAD C880. Each produced a different sound when mated to the 1.5 but what was clear was that the amplifier was adding little if anything at all to the sound. It simply produced what it was fed without any interference on its part. This allowed me to really listen to the varying voicing speaker designers build into their speakers. Most audiophiles are looking for what they term "truth" in reproduction. They want a set of components that simply reproduce, as close as possible the original source, without adding any coloration. This amplifier is one of those components. When a source such as Patricia Barber's "Too Rich for MY Blood" from her Café Blue CD (Premonition Records PREM - 737-2) comes through with the smoky warmth of an intimate nightclub, so much so that an ex smoker like me feels compelled to cough you know the amp is bringing you what was laid down on the original tracks. I am a big fan of the band Hiroshima. I have seen them live, in concert numerous times. Generally I have been able to sit very near the stage and enjoy the full impact of the performance. On the song "One World" from their LA CD (Qwest/Reprise 9 45601-2) they give you everything in the spectrum. One World is usually a show ender for the band and it is a

powerful and impacting tune. The song starts with the Taiko drums of Johnny Mori and Danny Yamamoto, combined with the June Kuramoto's Koto harp, and adds Dan Kuramoto's delicate flute work and Charles Johnson's soaring and stinging guitar. The Usher 1.5 handed me a performance with all instruments weighted in the same fashion and with the same slam as the live performance. The Usher delivers the requisite speed and slam in the bottom registers where you need the drums to rattle your bones, without drowning out the delicate plucking of the strings of the Koto. In listening to this particular track the Usher did an outstanding job of giving me all the slam and detail that allowed me to hear the breath that drove the flute and the very edge of the distortion in the guitar. The entire performance was delivered with the proper sense of scale, depth and width of soundstage. That is quite a feat in my book, especially for a \$2500.00 amplifier. All the while handling the vocals of every track I listened to with a very palpable and real sense of warmth. In a nutshell this was the second time in the last year that an Usher product simply knocked me on my hind end.

In some respects the Usher 1.5 stereo amp seems to want to be something it is not, in the way that Pinocchio wanted to be real boy even though he was made of wood. This is a punchy solid state amp that wants to be a tube amp at heart. The good news is the Usher 1.5 is not made of wood and needs to be nothing more than what it is. A very solid, and highly capable amplifier that will produce years of satisfying listening experiences. I imagine that anyone wanting more power could buy two of these amps, bridge each one and have a very satisfying monoblock system for \$5000.00 and still undercut the nearest performers in price by a considerable amount. I have said it before, Usher is a company worth a very close look and an even closer listen if you want high end quality and sound without the nosebleed prices that often accompany high end products. If you are in the market for a do it all stereo power amp this is one very highly recommended contender!

